The Tercentenary of the Prayer Book

A Sermon

by

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This pamphlet contains the text of the sermon preached by His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury at a service held in St Paul's Cathedral on Tuesday, 29 May 1962, to commemorate the Book of Common Prayer of 1662.

O God thou art my God:
early will I seek thee.
Psalm 63. 1.

RESTORATION AND REAFFIRMATION

Three hundred years ago there was given to the Church the Book of Common Prayer in the final form in which the Church, and indeed the world, have known it. There had been, a little over a century earlier, the first English Prayer Book created by the genius of Archbishop Cranmer. "Cranmer", says G. M. Trevelyan, "timid at the Council Board, with pen in hand in his study could write like a man inspired." It was this English Prayer Book, modified a little in the reign of King Edward, Queen Elizabeth, and King James, which every parish church and every Cathedral knew until the Cromwellian Government banished it. It is therefore a restoration which we are to-day commemorating: a restoration with some final additions. It happened rapidly, because it had been longed for, and the way had been prepared for it by the Anglican piety which the Commonwealth could not destroy. On 21 and 22 November 1661 Royal Letters were read to the Convocations of Canterbury and York authorizing them to review the Book of Common Prayer. They set to work, the Bishops and the Clergy, and within a month the work was done. The old Book remained; but there were new prayers, including the General Thanksgiving by Bishop Reynolds of Norwich, the Prayer for All Sorts and Conditions of Men by Bishop Gunning of Ely, and from the pen of Bishop Cosin of Durham there came

some greatly loved collects and that best translation of an ancient hymn, "Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire". Most characteristic of all was the newly written Preface, telling of the ideas now vindicated and restored. "It hath been the wisdom of the Church of England, ever since the first compiling of her Publick Liturgy, to keep the mean between the two extremes, of too much stiffness in refusing, and of too much easiness in admitting any variations from it." It is in that spirit that the Prayer Book was designed for "the procuring of Reverence and the exciting of Piety and Devotion in the publick Worship of God", and made its appeal to "all sober peaceable and truly conscientious sons of the Church of England."

Created by the bishops and clergy, the Prayer Book was accepted by Parliament, and by the Royal Assent it was annexed to the Act of Uniformity. It was a restoration, and for that we who are Anglicans can never be too thankful. It was a reaffirmation of a Church reformed indeed, possessing the open Bible and using the Bible in every part of its public service, and retaining also those marks of Catholic continuity which the Puritans would fain abolish: the threefold ministry of the ancient Church, the rite of Confirmation, the absolution by the priest, the round of festivals and fasts and commemorations of the Saints. The *Via Media* was coming back, and soon the people became familiar with it. Mr and Mrs Samuel Pepys had already attended service at their parish church, St Olave, Hart Street, "where Mr Mills did begin to nibble at the Common Prayer by saying Glory be to the Father, after he had read the two Psalms: but the people had been so little used to it that they could not tell what to answer". But back it came. The Prayer Book became the rule of faith of our Church, the bond of unity of the Anglican Communion spreading throughout the world, the moulding influence of a

Christianity able to reach out to the ancient Churches of East and West and to the Reformation Churches too. More still, its language has become a part of our speech: its subconscious influence has perhaps been deeper even than the conscious loyalties it has evoked. Above all, let it be remembered, the Prayer Book was the work of men who cared for God and the worship of God. That is why they used language, easily, dexterously, in framing prayer and praise: "O God thou art my God: early will I seek thee." It was that which created the Prayer Book. It was a spirit like Laud's, who said on the day of his execution, "Lord, I am coming to thee as fast as I can".

TWO ENGLANDS

Yet, with what sadness is it to be remembered, it is one thing to affirm what we believe to be true, it is another thing to coerce and punish and persecute those who do not accept it. And there are those to-day to whom 1662 means the harsh penal laws which forbade the dissenters to worship in the way they desired and drove their ministers five miles from the towns where their homes had been. Two Englands, "Church and Chapel", were created by 1662. Two kinds of opinion, or conviction, there can always be; but two Englands, two cultures, embittered and aloof, became the pattern of our history. And while to-day we thank God for so much, we implore him also to heal and to forgive, as the sons of the Prayer Book and the sons of the Ejectment stand together saying, "O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee".

THE CALL TO UNITY

Three centuries pass. And what does 1662 say to us, as we live and die, work and pray, in 1962?

First there is the call to unity. Already the spirit of unity is moving. Neither the sons of the Prayer Book

nor the sons of the Great Ejectment can see their history with quite the same eyes as before. Both are conscious of the larger fact of Christendom in this country and thank God for his great goodness in the whole story of Christian life and witness. We of the Prayer Book, without diminishing our own convictions, thank God for what the Nonconformist tradition has given to our country, for the *Pilgrim's Progress* of Bunyan, for the pastoral zeal of Baxter, for the hymns of Doddridge and Watts, for the chapels where men and women and children learnt to pray, to love the Bible, and to spread righteousness abroad, for the preaching and teaching of a Dale and a Forsyth, for faithfulness to the crown rights of the Lord Jesus in his Church, for the will to say "At a great price obtained I this freedom". So too the sons of the Ejectment are with us to-day, and we do not doubt that they, without mitigating their convictions, thank God for what the Book of Common Prayer has given to religion and piety, to the moulding of speech and feeling, of worship and goodness, wherever the English tongue is used. In 1962 we can speak as we could not have spoken in 1762 or in 1862: and speaking truth in love we ask that God who gives beyond our asking will lead us to unity, to unity in the truth.

THE CALL TO REVISION

Next, there is to-day the call to revision. We give not dishonour, but honour, to the authors of our Prayer Book by trying to meet the needs of our time. Fifty-six years have passed since a Royal Commission declared that "the law of public worship is too narrow for the needs of this generation". Revision is urgent, partly because of changes in speech and culture, partly because of new and creative liturgical ideals in our own Communion and beyond it, partly because the world which needs the care and the compassion of the

Church's prayer is a world so different from the world of Samuel Pepys or Samuel Johnson. Yet modest as we are about our power to write as a Cranmer or a Cosin could write, we would set about revision not all at once but in stages and experiments, for which we ask the power. The need is urgent. Help us and encourage us.

Last, if 1962 brings its call to unity, and its call to revision too, it brings no less the call to the claims of the worship of Almighty God. Three centuries ago the citizens expected to worship God, and passions were stirred as to whether to worship him in this way or in that. To-day the chaos of the world has beneath it the deep estrangement of the world from its Creator. "They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and have hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, which hold no water." There is a saying of an unknown, ancient Christian writer: "As the soul is in the body so are the Christians in the world." In a world that has lost the power, lost the desire to have that communion with its Creator for which the world was made, the Christians lift up their souls in communion with the Creator and in so doing they are serving the world, they are helping to keep the soul of the world alive: "O God thou art my God, early will I seek thee." Early—for if God does not come first, God comes nowhere at all; early—for he is indeed our Maker, our Father, and our Judge; early—for to him our adoration, our thankfulness, and our awe and dread go first of all. May we so worship him that by the depth and simplicity of our worship many are drawn to come and worship him too, discovering that he has made us for himself, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in him.

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